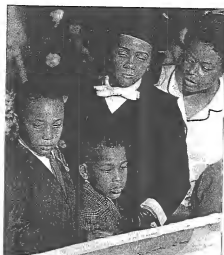


A handshake for the cameras: King, left, and Ray in their CNN moment



Grieving: King, center, and family in 1968



In custody: Ray, center, in 1969

JUSTICE

History as a Media Event

Martin Luther King's son met his father's convicted killer and the nation tuned in live, on CNN

By RICHARD TURNER

ENSHRINED IN A NATIONAL HOLIDAY and the inspiration for the name of a hundred thoroughfares, Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy seems as unassailable as ancient granite. But last week that legacy turned up as bad television. In a live CNN exclusive from a Nashville prison, King's son Dexter, 36, sat across from 69-year-old James Earl Ray and said he believed Ray was innocent of his father's 1968 murder.

The session was painfully awkward. "How have you been doing? I know this is a difficult time for you," said King. Ray, gaunt and ill from liver disease, replied: "The only thing is, my stomach kind of bulges out, and I need minor surgery."

Such banalities were a reminder that it was a depressingly ordinary man—a two-bit ex-con racist drifter—who changed history. This dissonance has helped drive those who believe that larger forces must have been involved and has persuaded some King allies to stand by Ray. Shortly

after the killing, one King aide said there was no way a "10-cent white boy" could have pulled off the murder of a "million-dollar black man" and offered to defend Ray in court. Ray's 1978 prison wedding was conducted by another King colleague. Ray's longtime attorney, William F. Pepper, was himself a King associate.

Many others close to King also believe that Ray had to be part of a conspiracy. "We know he stalked Dr. King," says the Rev. Jesse Jackson. "Who gave him the money to do that and the financing to flee the country afterwards?" But King's family had stayed silent on Ray until Pepper persuaded them this year to join the call for a new trial.

The CNN encounter came across as a carefully staged media event. King: "I just want to ask you for the record, did you kill my father?" Ray: "No, I didn't, no." King family adviser Philip Jones says the media have been "hounding" the family for years to speak out on Ray and insists nothing was orchestrated. "This was very spiritual for the family," he says, vehemently denying

any link between the meeting and a movie deal the Kings have with Oliver Stone.

The "conspiracy" may have been more prosaic than the evil web envisioned by King's circle. A 1979 congressional investigation concluded that Ray pulled the trigger, and that he probably had help, but not from the government or the mob. "It looks like the used-car-dealer, truck-stop sort," says Taylor Branch, author of the King biography "Parting the Waters." He adds: "To say that Ray deserves a new trial and that these conspiracy forces are the real killers is very dangerous. It would throw away what little closure we have, which is that Ray almost certainly pulled the trigger, and that his motivation was racial. He will go from being the perpetrator of a crime to a government victim."

And indeed, Dexter King told Ray on CNN, "In a strange sort of way, we're both victims." Well, King is, anyway. But this particular episode in history wound up playing a bit like Oprah.

With ANNE UNDERWOOD